



Date Issued: 11/05/2013

## **SUMMARY MEMORANDUM**

### **Quality Review of Special Education Service Delivery in District of Columbia Public Schools and Charter Schools: American Institutes for Research Final Study Report**

#### **Background**

In January 2012, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education's Division of Specialized Education partnered with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to launch a project designed to assist the District in assessing special education program quality in the District of Columbia and develop tools for continuous improvement.

As a component of the work, AIR was asked to conduct a qualitative research study in a sample of schools the District of Columbia. This study was designed to help inform the District of Columbia's special education capacity-building strategy by assisting decision-makers with identifying promising practices and barriers to providing a continuum of high quality education services for students with disabilities.

AIR was tasked with developing quality program indicators to review programs. Once these indicators were developed, they also served as the basis for a Special Education Quality Review (SEQR) Tool, a web-based self-assessment tool to be used by local education agencies (LEAs) and schools serving District of Columbia students.

#### **Study Overview: Key Findings and Recommendations**

Study indicators were based upon three sources of data: research and policy literature, current quality indicators established in the field, and stakeholder input gleaned from a series of community forums held with educators, community advocates, and families.

The final assessment domains include: IEP development, access, instructional supports, behavior supports, staff collaboration and professional development, data-driven decision making, family engagement, and leadership.

As part of its analysis, AIR reviewed data gathered in the 2011-2012 school year from surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and document review from a sample of 20 public schools and one nonpublic school.

As noted in the executive summary of the report issued on March 12, 2013, "[the final report] describes the findings for each domain, summarizing the evidence ratings, key practices, and challenges for selected indicators. The report also reviews findings from the school-level interviews regarding system-level challenges, and concludes with a series of recommendations intended to assist OSSE in supporting the implementation of quality special education programs across the District."

The report includes findings about both the successes and challenges experienced by representative schools. Key promising practices identified by the report include the following:

- The schools studied were found to use standards-aligned instruction, differentiation of instructional strategies, including scaffolding, and evidence of targeted behavioral supports to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- The majority of schools demonstrated evidence that general and special educators meet regularly and that cross-disciplinary collaboration has been formally established and supported.
- In all but one site visit school, evidence indicates that data is collected and used to modify instruction and inform intervention planning; and nearly all schools practice concerted efforts to engage families in decision-making and progress monitoring.
- Last, nearly all schools have leadership with subject matter expertise related to special education, and these school leaders make professional development a priority.

Some practice challenges highlighted by the study include the following:

- While the majority of schools demonstrate evidence that IEPs were supported by their evaluations, the schools needed further support creating measurable IEP goals.
- Overall, although schools are collecting and using data to differentiate instruction, more support is needed to assist staff with differentiating work assignments and student projects to allow students with disabilities to demonstrate mastery of concepts.
- Schools identified a need for further professional development in evidence-based instructional and behavior support, including co-teaching, and cited a need for more professional planning time to ensure effective collaboration.
- Schools also identified a need for more staffing support and, specifically, for enhanced curriculum support related to implementation of the Common Core State Standards.
- A number of school professionals identified a desire to shift the focus from an emphasis on compliance to an emphasis on student outcomes.

As noted above, in addition to school-level findings, AIR developed a set of recommendations for OSSE and other education partners to assist in understanding and removing barriers to create pathways for student success, anchored in enhanced collaboration among OSSE, the District of Columbia Public Schools, and the Public Charter School Board. OSSE is pleased to note that many of the AIR report recommendations are already in practice, including:

- The provision of comprehensive foundational professional development on IEP development, Common Core State Standards implementation, co-teaching, and data driven intervention planning;
- The development of State-level Communities of Practice (CoPs), including the planned launch in 2013-2014 of a CoP with a focus on instructional best practices anchored in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and common core implementation for students with disabilities;
- Continued training and technical assistance with implementing school-wide positive behavior support, and trauma-informed functional behavior assessment and crisis intervention at the classroom and student levels;

- Data-driven tiered technical assistance for LEAs which includes foundational training, on-site coaching, root cause analysis, and improvement planning;
- The expansion of OSSE's special education parent and community team in FY 14, and development of an expanded parent advisory group to inform the Division of Specialized Education's work;
- The creation of the Special Education Quality Review (SEQR) tool, which is currently available to LEAs and nonpublic schools and provides the framework for shifting toward quality outcomes; and
- Ongoing monthly collaboration between OSSE, PCSB, and DCPS to ensure coordinated planning and support for LEAs.

At the conclusion of the study, each study participant received a tailored report on findings. In addition, OSSE has distributed the report to partner agencies and continues to utilize the report's findings to inform refinements of the District's special education reform strategy.

OSSE thanks the participating LEAs and their leaders for responding to our request to engage in critical conversation with schools and other stakeholders regarding quality special education programming. We look forward to continuing sustained improvements in the delivery of high quality special education services that benefit all of the District's children and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesus Aguirre", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jesus Aguirre  
Acting Superintendent of Education